

Alone With the Alone

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the artistic creative process and its relationship with esoteric spiritual and religious beliefs and practices. Pulling from traditional, hermetic, and occult sources, I have developed an alternative view of the creative process, in which I see it symbolic of a metaphysical rite in humans. This metaphysical rite is rooted in the fact that humans are creative beings and this innate creative functioning is what makes us unique. To better demonstrate this view, I have developed my own creative process into an intuitively based ritual, performed before a live audience.

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Alone With the Alone

I. The audio and video installation *Alone With the Alone* marks a radical departure in my artistic practice. The shift from making two-dimensional printed and drawn works on paper to a four-dimensional¹ audio and visual performance-based kinetic-installation with projected digital animations, to me seemed both logical and necessary. The goal and purpose of this shift in my work was to attempt to find a balance in my ‘artistic practice’².

My ‘artistic practice’ has always been rooted in the activation of a meditative and contemplative state. To activate this state I approach art making like a mantra, focusing on repetitive actions, to induce a trance like state within me. It is the ‘innate sense’³ that comes from this process which guides me in my art making. This ‘sense,’ seems to be the same creative function that processes light into form, a subtle mediator between word and object.

I first noticed a discussion and exploration of this ‘sense’ in early 20th century art, specifically with the works of Breton and the Surrealists and also with Kandinsky and the young abstractionists. Breton and the Surrealists attempted to explore the unconscious activity of this sense in their creative and artistic practices involving automatic drawing techniques, group séances, and use of classical symbolism, mainly stemming from the Western esoteric Hermetic and Alchemical Traditions. As M.E. Warlick states in her book *Max Ernst and Alchemy*, “...the alchemical revival was thriving in 1929, when in

¹ Those four dimensions being space, light, sound, and time.

² By ‘artistic practice,’ I am referring to any kind methodology developed in order to increase one’s awareness of oneself. For me this mainly consists of drawing, screen-printing, and music, but I have begun to consider other aspects of my daily life as ‘artistic practice,’ such as household duties (cleaning, cooking, etc.). In this sense, I consider something like the practice of science or even meditation ‘artistic.’

³ Perhaps the word ‘sense’ here is misleading because what I am referring to is supra-sensual, a kind of sense of senses, or of the body, mind, and their functioning. In religious and mystical traditions this it is often referred as the soul or the third eye.

the *Second Manifesto* Andre Breton an analogy of goals between the Surrealists and the medieval alchemists” (*Max Ernst and Alchemy*, p. 32). It is my belief that their use of these symbols in the traditional sense is a clear example of their understanding of the function and deeper meaning behind this unconscious creative function. With Kandinsky and the young abstractionists, one can see the discussion of this sense in his theoretical writings and their general spirit, fevourently calling for a revitalization of the spirit in both art and the modern world.

II. Unfortunately, the spirit of Kandinsky and the abstractionists was largely extinguished by the rampant nihilism and fascism that spread throughout war torn Europe. In my opinion, post-war attempts at abstraction never seemed to have that same vital spirit that had possessed Kandinsky and the abstractionists. As Coomaraswamy states, “our abstract art is not an iconography of transcendental forms, but the realistic picture of a disintegrated mentality” (*Figures of Speech...*, p.223). However, as Warlick points out, there were large occult and hermetic revivals during both post-war periods throughout Europe. Much of this revival was attributed to the war and the direct confrontation with death that the human consciousness was forced to face (*Max Ernst and Alchemy*, pp.27-33). The influence of these revivals can be seen in later Surrealists works such as; “Kurt Seligmann’s *The Mirror of Magic* (1948) (which) explored the mysteries of the ancient world- Gnosticism, alchemy, magic, witchcraft, the cabala, Rosicrucianism, and the tarot- and was embellished with traditional hermetic imagery” and “Breton’s later publications including, *L’Amour fou* (1937), *Arcane 17* (1944 and 1945), *Le Cle de Champs* (1953), and *L’art magique*, (which) are his most hermetic,

reflecting his expanded study of alchemical manuscripts” (*Max Ernst and Alchemy*, p. 33).

One of the most brilliant contributors to these revivals was Henry Corbin, a French scholar whose primary interest was focused in esoteric Islamic and Gnostic studies. In the 1950s, Corbin revived the writings of the 12th century Persian mystic, Suhrawardi. Suhrawardi, whose visionary poetry is actually a revival of ancient Persian/Zoroastrian beliefs, discusses the proper activation of this organ, which Corbin has termed as the *mundus imaginalis*. In his article titled *Mundus Imaginalis or the Imaginary and the Imagenal*, Corbin begins by defining the term as thus:

In offering the two Latin words *mundus imaginalis* as the title of this discussion, I intend to treat a precise order of reality corresponding to a precise mode of perception, because Latin terminology gives the advantage of providing us with a technical and fixed point of reference, to which we can compare the various more-or-less irresolute equivalents that our modern Western languages suggest to us.

I will make an immediate admission. The choice of these two words was imposed upon me some time ago, because it was impossible for me, in what I had to translate or say, to be satisfied with the word *imaginary*. This is by no means a criticism addressed to those of us for whom the use of the language constrains recourse to this word, since we are trying together to reevaluate it in a positive sense. Regardless of our efforts, though, we cannot prevent the term *imaginary*, in current usage that is not

deliberate, from being equivalent to signifying unreal, something that is and remains outside of being and existence-in brief, something *utopian*. I was absolutely obliged to find another term because, for many years, I have been by vocation and profession an interpreter of Arabic and Persian texts, the purposes of which I would certainly have betrayed if I had been entirely and simply content-even with every possible precaution-with the term *imaginary*. I was absolutely obliged to find another term if I did not want to mislead the Western reader that it is a matter of uprooting long-established habits of thought, in order to awaken him to an order of things, the sense of which it is the mission of our colloquia at the "Society of Symbolism" to rouse (Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam, pp.1-2).

In this sense, it is clear that we are not dealing with some kind fantasy based imagination, but with a supra-sensory pool of archetypes and abstract forms that ‘fall’⁴ into our sensory experience and make up reality. The description of this subtle organ, as Corbin calls it, displays it as something that can be controlled, when usually it is referred to as some mysterious, purely unconscious action or force, i.e. Jung and most of the psychoanalytical tradition. This type of language and discussion of this ‘organ’⁵ led my research towards ancient mystical and esoteric spiritual systems and practices as sources.

⁴ The type of ‘decent’ I am referring to here is not a physical one, but based on an upper and lower hierarchal view of the relationship between heavenly unmanifested states and corporeal manifested states, where the divine must come down to a corporeal level in order to be actualized. This type of downward motion also implies a certain level of corruption or distortion to the divine essence and it is through process purification that one can discern the profane from the sacred.

⁵ Again it must be stressed here that this is not a physical organ of any sort, but an intuitive organic functioning, with both conscious and unconscious influences. The word organ here is employed in order to keep true to the symbolic language Corbin has painstakingly attempted to create and preserve.

Mystical and esoteric philosophies and practices are often rooted in the activation and purification of this sense in order to focus one's mind solely towards the divine. For example, in his treatise of the subject, *The Shape of the Light*, 12th Century Islamic-Persian mystical theosopher Suhrawardi, associates this sense with the soul, the animator of the body, which, through its connection with the spirit, knows of the divine. *The Shape of the Light* describes the ascent of the soul through the "seven forms of light" as it manifests itself. In it, Suhrawardi describes this sense as thus:

..the rational soul (the Cosmic Reason) is an essence of light which you cannot see...this rational soul has its own powers of realization that help it to see things its way. Some of these powers of observation are evident and some are hidden. The evident ones are the five senses... The hidden power of observation is a mysterious force like a pool, into which the observations of the five senses flow... (*Shape of the Light*, p.54).

In the Seventh, and final, "Form of Light", Suhrawardi describes the process of purification one's soul goes through;

The human soul, which is also called the Cosmic Reason, is one of the essences of the universe of spirits. This spiritual realm is the universe of abstractions and conceptions. When this essence is freed from the preoccupations of material powers of the body, eating and sleeping decrease, awareness increases, the flesh awakens, and the spiritual essence is strengthened by receiving divine virtues (*Shape of the Light*, p.95).

Here we are presented with a very common symbolic, esoteric, and mystical theme, a purifying of this sense, or soul as it is often referred to, this seat of the imagination,

moving from the fantasy-based imaginary to the purely ‘Imaginal’⁶ realm. We see similar processes of realization and purification in the hermetic Alchemical tradition, the Sepher Yetziarh (lit. “Book of Creation”) in the mystical Jewish tradition, Sufism, and the Yogic tradition, just to name a few. It is these traditions and concepts that have been the greatest influence on my artistic practice and concern.

III. Because of a fascination with this sense, the process has become an equally, if not more, important aspect to my artistic practice as the actual product. My insistence on the importance of the process in my work was the greatest motivator for me to make this shift from works on paper to performance time-based work. In this sense, I wanted to present the creative process as some kind of ritual. In the book, *Figures of Speech or Figures of Thought? The Traditional View of Art*, Ananda Coomaraswamy describes the nature of Buddhist art as a “metaphysical rite” whose forms are of “superhuman origin” where “no distinction can be drawn between art and contemplation” (*Figures of Speech*...p.162). This idea of art as a metaphysical rite, rather than some kind of entertainment or purely sensual experience, points to the idea creative ability of humans is an intuitive function, which separates us from other animals, a conscious soul. This feeling of art as this kind of ancient universal ritual was further impressed upon me while I was in Brooklyn attending a noise music performance at a Do-It-Yourself (D.I.Y) style venue.

Ever since I was in high school I have always been attracted to underground, D.I.Y.-style cultural movements and settings. The general aesthetic in these types of cultures is based on functionality of the medium over the appearance of the object. The

⁶ Corbin in *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam*, “We will thus have the *imaginal* world be intermediate between the *sensory* world and the *intelligible* world” (p.19).

venues and galleries of D.I.Y. and underground cultures are often in basements, garages, vacant-buildings in elevated railway pillars, and so things generally have a less than pristine look to them. This particular venue in Brooklyn was no different; in fact, it was in the basement of a larger D.I.Y. space, hosting more pop-friendly rock music, so it was even dirtier than your average space. The music at the show was typical of its genre, lots of different noises condensed down to one noise, but it was this experience that helped me clearly identify the artist as a practitioner of an eternal metaphysical rite. The idea of one person taking multiple sounds and putting them through multiple effects then projecting them back at one source, the listener, seemed to be the perfect metaphor for how the divine works in the manifested world. This is a theme that also runs through mystical and esoteric traditions and is a model central to all monotheistic religions.

Athanasius of Alexandria puts it much better in his treatise, *Contra Gentes*;

Just as a musician, tuning his lyre and skillfully combining the bass and the sharp notes, the middle and the others, produces a single melody, so the wisdom of God, holding the universe like a lyre, draws together the things in the air with those on earth, and those in heaven with those in the air... (Contra Gentes, p.117).

It is no mere coincidence that Athanasius chooses to use the metaphor of the musician here, because in this treatise he is speaking largely to the common people, so he uses something they see in everyday life as a reminder of the divine action in the world.

The D.I.Y aesthetic is something that is largely missing in the modern gallery setting, where people expect a certain level of perfection and often times unnecessary adornment (frames, mats, etc.), which only seem to increase its value in terms of

marketability. The exclusion of this aesthetic from a large portion of the art world is fueled not only by capitalistic and elitist desires, but by a general “assumption that art is essentially an aesthetic, that is, sensational and emotional, behavior, a passion suffered rather than an act performed” (Figures of Speech..., p.223). Coomaraswamy goes on to describe the symptoms of this ‘disease’, as he states it, as;

..our dominating interest in style, and indifference to the truth and meaning of works; the importance we attach to the artist’s personality; the notion that the artist is a special kind of man; rather than every man is a special kind of artist; the distinction we make between fine art and applied art; and the idea that the nature to which art must be true is not Creative Nature, but our own immediate environment, and more especially, ourselves (Figures of Speech... p. 223).

Although written in the 1940’s, Coomaraswamy’s symptoms are still apparent in today’s contemporary art world. From the big name galleries and museums right down to the very foundation, academia, all these institutions continue to push their closed ideas of what art is and what art isn’t onto the general public. In the end, these nominalist, egotistical, and sensualist attitudes are stifling not only to other’s creative and artistic freedoms, but towards the development of a consciousness that can see beyond our physical and mental limitations and ideas.

Early examples of a anti-gallery/authority, D.I.Y. mentality can be seen in the actions of such artist groups as the Italian Futurists and the Dadaists. A fine example comes in the mid-50’s with Sun Ra and the founding of one of the first artist run record labels, El Saturn Records, in Chicago, which “helped define the do-it-yourself ethic that

came to be a central part of the American independent music industry” (*Pathways to Unknown Worlds*...p. 7). Like the Futurists, Sun Ra used this mentality to speak of social and cultural awareness and change. This spirit can be seen in the beatnik culture of the late 50’s, the psychedelic/hippie culture of the 60’s, the underground punk/metal/hardcore cultures of the late 70’s, 80’s, and 90’s, and the almost constant noise scenes in highly urban areas such as Brooklyn and Berlin.

The appeal of these underground cultures comes from the general honesty of expression that this type of aesthetic provokes. If you go and see some rock band at this type of venue, you know instantly these are not people trying to do this for the money and fame, but honest musicians and artists wishing to express themselves. In this way, the music and art presented at these D.I.Y. and underground venues represent a pure form of contemporary folk art. Pure in the sense that it is a true reflection of the culture and environment, but still allowed the freedom of less mediated expression. By breaking the boundaries of the gallery, D.I.Y. venues offer the chance to have a closer interaction with both the art and artist, further blurring that division. Rarely have I walked into a drawing show and felt the sense I get when I draw, but attending a noise show one is immediately immersed within a supra-sensory state. I have found this more immersive, direct experience of a live performance to be a closer representation of the creative process than that of the cold, boxed-in, passive experience of the modern-day gallery.

IV. Many, if not most, of the aesthetic choices in the installation *Alone with the Alone*, are influenced by and reference these subcultures. From the heavy-metal style,

loud droning guitar and general noise to the ‘psychedelic’⁷ nature of the imagery, I have chosen elements from these subcultures which I feel still hold some of the same symbolism of the mystical and esoteric language relating to the creative act, to bring into the gallery setting, in an attempt to bridge the gap between fine art and folk art.

So, the main concept of *Alone With the Alone* was to treat this creative process, which is usually confined to the studio, as a ritual. The drive for this concept came from a feeling of dissatisfaction with my works on paper, stemming from the disconnection they had with the process of the art. The main goal for this concept was then, to present this process as something sacred and universal, thus challenging the divisions in art and the very notion of what is art, who is an artist, or what is the actual role of the artist in contemporary culture. One way I treated these performances like a ritual, was by wearing a large hooded black robe and entering the gallery ringing a traditional Tibetan bell it as I circumambulated the tent in a counter-clock-wise direction for both the opening and closing performances. While initially, these elements may seem kind of hokey, or cliché, I included these elements with a sincere reasoning. The black robe and hood act as a costume, meant to worn only during scheduled performances, which designates the wearer as the practitioner. The robe also creates a certain level of anonymity and helps suggest the occult or esoteric aspects and foundations of the act. The hood itself serves as a barrier of sorts, which focuses the attention of the wearer forward, blocking out peripheral distractions. The bell is traditionally used for marking the beginning and ending of meditation sessions, and in the performance it is used in a similar fashion, to clear the air at the beginning of the performance, stop unwanted

⁷ Referring here both to the aesthetic of the ‘60s hippie movements (bright, colorful, kaleidoscopic) but also in a literal sense, being that of shapes, forms, colors, and sounds employed in a manner to elicit a state in which sensory perception is intensified.

conversations, and focus the attention of the audience to the performance. These conscious theatrical elements combined with samples of chanting monks, Islamic prayers, and ringing bells, created a somber setting more apt for the meditative and contemplative feeling I wished to evoke. Another element employed to suggest the ritualistic aspect of the creative process, was working with the sound in the gallery during all the hours that the gallery was open for the week my show was up. The main reason for doing this was to subvert our contemporary idea of ‘work,’⁸ and that there are designated ‘working’ and non-‘working’ hours of the day. From this perspective, art is not seen as something integrated into our everyday lives, but something that is done during the non-‘working’ hours of the day, to simply entertain oneself. These contemporary ideas of work and leisure are stifling the evolution of art and the role they play in defining culture. One last important element of the installation was the dualistic experiences offered for viewing the installation, either outside the tent or inside the tent. I wanted to give the viewer the option to experience the work, ritual, etc. from the two main experiences I have felt with art. The first one being your typical gallery experience, where there is some kind of physical or psychological barrier between the work, the artist, and the viewer. This is what I have called a passive experience. The opposite of this would, of course, be an active experience, which would be more like the immersive, up-close, D.I.Y. or “rock concert” experience. In this installation, the view from the outside is the passive experience, where people focus on the video, the tent, and the performer, and walk around the tent, getting multiple views. The active experience, would then be the inner view. With this inner view, people are immediately confronted by the sound, the space

⁸ This contemporary idea of work is usually associated with a job that you go to on weekdays from 9-5, of which you are working for mainly monetary concerns.

around them becomes more confined, they are forced to see the whole from a limited number of views, the videos become mere lights, which shift colors based on the movement of the tent. Inside the tent people were more apt to interact with the project, either by discussing some of the ideas with me, singing or playing along with the music, or simply sitting in the middle mediating. Most importantly, despite all the deep conceptual backing, aesthetic choices, or revolt against the contemporary state of art, I wanted to give people a lasting experience, something a little different, but at the same time very familiar, with a hope that they shall be inspired to do the same.

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